

“Performing in Everyday Life”

“The notion of entertainment is anti-theatrical.” Eugene Ionesco, *Improvisation, or The Shepherd Chameleon (Impromptu d’Alma*, 1956).

“In the late ‘60s Grotowski spoke of ‘personalization.’ It was an idea about representing character and emotion by re-creating and remixing parts of yourself (your “self” being a Proustian entity of selves piled on one another in remembered time). Character was persona recombinant.” Lee Breuer, “The Theatre and Its Trouble,” *The American Theatre*, 1986.

--S. E. Gontarski

Part I

The Fuzzy Edges of Contemporary Theatre

Theatre has always been something of a mercurial if not chimeric art, a hybrid form, an amalgam of ritual (re)enactments, performed beliefs, archival records, and human imagination, unstable and even pliable by definition since its realization relies on a multiplicity of sources and facilitators coalescing under unstable, tenuous and often improvisational conditions. The result is invariably a composite beast, a fusion of forms reconfigured in each iteration. Unsurprisingly, then, what we call theatre has what Richard Schechner calls “blurry boundaries” (Schechner 2012, 44) or here fuzzy edges, if edges it has at all since edges, like boundaries, suggest demarcation, territory, borders, zones, a demesne, a pale, that is, limits, and the art of contemporary performance cuts across, runs through, is entangled with, bleeds into not only many another contemporary art form but intersects with and overlaps popular entertainments and everyday activities, religious and secular, so that the borders, distinctions, boundaries, even generic separations are often indistinguishable among acts, kinetic and performative activities. Moreover, much contemporary or alternative theatre practice, in particular, develops in defiance of a mimetic tradition, the so-called realistic or illusionary threads of performative art with their emphases on architectural and material validity, their focus on family constellations and commitments to simulations of epistemologically stable and so familiar worlds.

In his seminal textbook, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Richard Schechner details what he sweepingly calls “Performing in Everyday Life” with a string of examples of contemporary performative activities: “Family and Social Roles—Job Roles — Spectator Sports and Other Popular Entertainments—Performing Arts—Secular and Sacred Rituals—Trance” (Schechner 2012, 172-3). Such a list is, of necessity, partial, but its implications are that we are all and always performers, in one way or another, engaged in what Schechner calls “restored behaviors” or “twice-behaved behaviors” that “have a life of their own. The original ‘truth’ or ‘source’ of the behavior may not be known. Or may be lost, ignored, or contradicted—even while that truth or source is being honored. How the strips of behavior were made, found, or developed may be unknown or concealed; elaborated; distorted by myth and tradition” (Schechner 2012, 34); that is, “Performing on stage, performing in special social situations (public ceremonies, for example), and performing in everyday life are a continuum. These various kinds of performing occur in widely divergent circumstances, from solo shows before the mirror to large-scale public events and rituals, from shaman healing rituals to identity changing trances, from theatre and dance to great and small roles of everyday life” (Schnechner 2012, 170). To paraphrase Heidegger, then, *Being-in-the-world* is a performance. Such issues entail and are complicated by ontological instability, the lack of something like pure, discrete being: “I may experience being ‘beside myself,’ ‘not myself,’ or taken over as in a trance.

The fact that there are multiple 'me's in every person is not a sign of derangement but the way things are" (Schechner 2012, 34-5). The enactments or performance of such cultural multiplicity and ontological instability is often presented through a composite of means, what Richard Kostelanetz will call a *Theatre of Mixed Means*.ⁱ

ⁱ Richard Kostelanetz. *Theatre of Mixed Means: An Introduction to Happenings, Kinetic Environments and other Mixed Media Performances*. New York: The Dial Press, 1968.